

Victim Witness Notification Program

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

MARCH 2003

The intent of the Victim Witness Notification Program is to provide program participants with information about offenders under the jurisdiction of the Department of Corrections. Victims of violent, sex, serious drug or felony harassment crimes are eligible for participation in the program. The program is responsible for notifying victims and witnesses when an offender releases from prison or transfers to a work release facility. The program is committed to providing victims and witnesses with timely and accurate information.

In 1999, the Victim Witness Notification Program designed and distributed a questionnaire to participants to obtain feedback about program services. The survey was sent to 4,000 program participants who were randomly selected from all people receiving Victim Witness services. The response rate was 22 percent or 860 people. This paper presents the findings of the survey.

DEMOGRAPHICS

About one-fourth of the program participants who responded to the survey indicated they were less than 40 years old (See Table 1). The remaining 75 percent of the respondents indicated they were 40 years or older.

The majority of program participants were female (60.5 percent). Nearly 36 percent were males, and the remaining 4 percent were unknown.

The survey asked what the primary language was of the program participants. The overwhelming response was English (98 percent). The remaining two percent indicated some other language or was unknown.

About 89 percent of the respondents indicated they were Caucasian (See Table 2). The remaining 11 percent were another race or were unknown.

Eighty-seven percent of the survey respondents said they were a resident of Washington State. About 12 percent were not a resident of Washington State and 1 percent were unknown.

Table 1

AGE OF RESPONDENTS		
	NUMBER	PERCENT
Less than 18	16	1.9%
18 to 30	61	7.1%
30 to 40	147	17.1%
40 to 50	253	29.4%
50 to 60	212	24.7%
Over 60	168	19.5%
Unknown	3	0.3%
Total	860	100%

Table 2

RACE OF RESPONDENTS		
	NUMBER	PERCENT
Caucasian	764	88.8%
African American	27	3.1%
Other	55	6.4%
Unknown	14	1.6%
Total	860	100%

It is clear that respondents to the survey have been involved in the program for many years. Nearly 40 percent have been in the program for 1 to 5 years (See Table 3).

INITIAL CONTACT

Participants were asked how they learned of the Victim Witness program. Half of the respondents said they were referred by the Prosecuting Attorney's Office (See Table 4). Respondents who chose "other" were given the opportunity to provide their own answer. Law enforcement agency was the most common answer provided for the "other" category.

SIGN-UP PROCESS

Participants were asked to rate the Department of Corrections' sign-up process on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 being very difficult, 4 being very easy). More than half of the respondents said the process was very easy. The mean score was 3.56.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide reasons why they may have found the sign-up process difficult. Over half of the respondents who found the process difficult said they were unaware of their enrollment in the program. Respondents unaware of their enrollment were either professional witnesses such as medical personnel or law enforcement, or jurors in a trial. There were also several people who knew they were automatically.

Respondents were also asked if they received confirmation of their enrollment in the program. Ninety-one percent said they did receive confirmation.

INFORMATION/SERVICES

Participants were asked a series of questions in several different areas about the program's information and services.

Brochures and Letters

Participants were asked to rate their ability to understand the brochures and invitational letters on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 being very difficult, 4 being very easy) (See Tables 5 and 6). For both brochures and letters, most people said they were easily or very easily understood.

Table 3

TIME INVOLVED IN PROGRAM		
	NUMBER	PERCENT
Less than 1 year	17	2.0%
1 to 5 years	343	39.9%
5 to 10 years	297	34.5%
More than 10 years	178	20.7%
Unknown	25	2.9%
Total	860	100%

Table 4

HOW RESPONDENTS LEARNED OF VICTIM WITNESS PROGRAM		
	NUMBER	PERCENT
Prosecuting Attorney's Office	430	50.0%
Department of Corrections	218	25.3%
Victim Advocacy Group	70	8.1%
Other	121	14.1%
Unknown	21	2.4%
Total	860	100%

Table 5

INFORMATION/SERVICES: BROCHURES		
	NUMBER	PERCENT
Very easy	364	42.3%
Easy	293	34.1%
Difficult	15	1.7%
Too difficult	10	1.2%
Unknown	178	20.7%
Total	860	100%
	NUMBER	SCORE
Mean	682	3.48

Table 6

INFORMATION/SERVICES: LETTERS		
	NUMBER	PERCENT
Very easy	394	45.8%
Easy	314	36.5%
Difficult	16	1.9%
Too difficult	6	0.7%
Unknown	130	15.1%
Total	860	100%
	NUMBER	SCORE
Mean	730	3.50

Calling the Victim Witness Notification Program

In regard to satisfaction when calling the Victim Witness Notification Program, participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being poor, 5 being excellent). Respondents were also given the opportunity to mark “does not apply”. The questionnaire asked about calling in four specific areas 1). Staff is knowledgeable, 2). Staff responds in a timely manner, 3). Staff is courteous, and 4). Staff has the ability to provide referral information.

On all four of the questions in regard to calling, about 50 percent of the people responded that the question was not applicable to them (See Chart 1). For those who were able to rate calls, however, the average score was 3.8 or higher in all four areas.

Program participants were also asked if they were aware of the Victim Witness Notification Program’s 1-800 number. One-third of respondents said they were aware of the phone number, and about 15 percent said they had used the phone number. This may attribute to the reason why many respondents answered “does not apply”.

Corresponding with the VWNP

Program participants were also asked to rate their satisfaction of correspondence with the Victim Witness Notification Program. The same scale was used for this question, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent.

In this series of questions, there were fewer people who chose “does not apply” (See Chart 2). Mean scores were 3.7 and above.

Chart 1

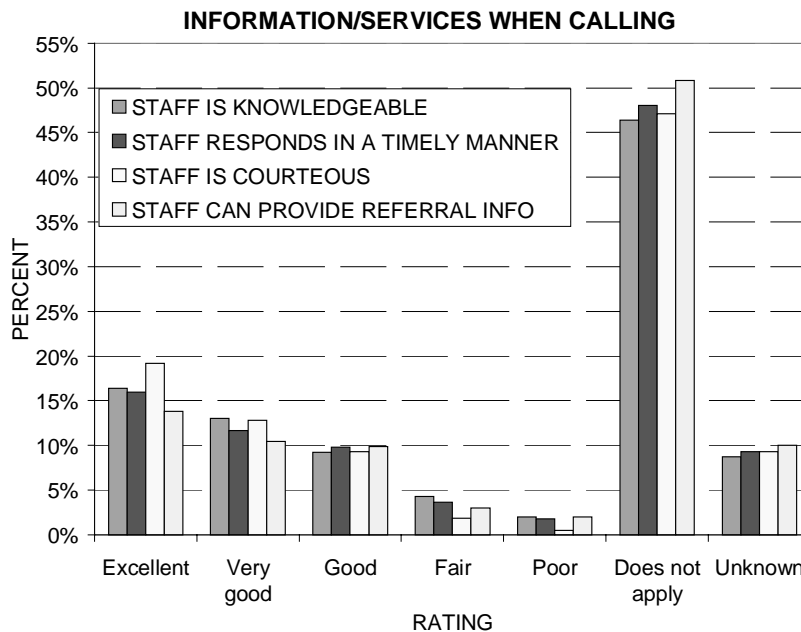
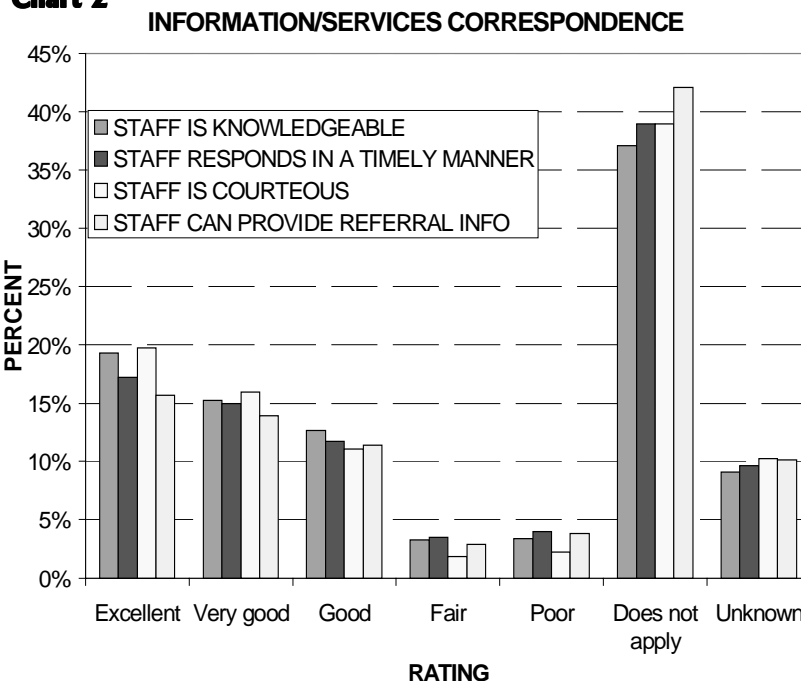


Chart 2





NOTIFICATION

The “Victim Witness Notification Program is responsible for all notifications to persons who qualify and elect to participate in the program” (DOC 390.300). The program is required to notify participants 30 days prior to an offender’s movement or release. Notifications are required: when an offender transfers from prison or pre-release to a work release facility; is paroled, releases to community placement, or completes a sentence; completes a community custody sanction of 120 days or more; posts an appeal bond; is released on emergency furlough; is on escorted leave; or dies during confinement.

Participants who received the survey were asked a series of questions regarding the notification process.

Was the information timely?

When asked this question, 51 percent said ‘yes’, 16 percent said ‘no’, and the remaining one-third said ‘do not know’ or were unknown.

If respondents were not satisfied, they were given the opportunity to say why. There were 234 respondents who provided additional comments. Of those people, 62 percent said they had not received any information. Respondents typically gave one of two reasons for this: 1). The participant knew the offender was still incarcerated, thus they were not expecting to receive any information. 2). The respondent made the assumption that the offender was still incarcerated since they had not received any information. From the limited information provided by respondents, we do not know by law and by DOC policy if they should have received a notification. We only know that they felt they should have, or that they were simply taking the opportunity to state that they had received none to this point, even if they weren’t expecting to receive notification.

About 26 percent of the respondents who provided additional information said they were not notified when they knew an offender was moved or released. In most instances the respondent heard from a third party that the offender was moved or released, then called the VWNP to verify the information. Many of the respondents provided a specific instance when an offender was moved, but they were not notified. Many of these were facility to facility movements, which do not require notification by law or by DOC policy. This leads us to conclude that not all program participants are clear as to when they should be receiving a notification.

The remaining 12 percent said the notification needed to arrive earlier. Most respondents said the information was received after a movement or release took place. Some said the notification arrived before the movement, however, they still suggested the information should arrive further in advance so the victim/witness would have more time to prepare for the movement or release.

Was the information easily understood?

Approximately 62 percent of the respondents said ‘yes’, the information was easily understood. Sixteen percent said ‘no’, and the remaining 22 percent were unknown. If respondents said the information was not easily understood, they were given the opportunity to say why. There were 83 respondents who provided additional information. Eighty-six percent of them said they could not rate whether or not the information was easily understood because they simply did not receive a notification. The rest of the respondents said they wanted more details on release information, parole hearings and why internal movements took place (i.e., transfer to minimum security prison).



What additional information would be helpful regarding offender movement?

Thirty-seven percent of the respondents provided an answer to this question. For those who answered, the majority said they wanted to receive notification of the offender's movements and release. Furthermore, respondents said they wanted to receive follow-up information while the offender was incarcerated or on community supervision. In addition to notification and follow up reports, respondents indicated they wanted more detail on the offender.

For instance, the location of the offender's release, address of residence, employment information, and a current picture of the offender upon release. Respondents also wanted explanations for why things were happening (i.e., why an offender was being released early).

Notification Baseline

One of the primary objectives of the survey was to establish a baseline as to what percent of program participants received a notification. Due to limitations in the qualitative data, and the inability to determine which participants should have legally received notification as opposed to which ones felt they should have received notification, a baseline was not determined from a single question on the survey. If a participant indicated in any of the open-ended questions that they did not receive a notification when they knew they should have or that the notification was received after the fact, they were included in the baseline number.

Out of 860 people who responded to the survey, 23 said they were not notified when an offender was released, and 23 said the notification was received late. This calculates to a baseline of 95 percent of program participants who were notified and notified on time. For those who said they did not receive a notification, we do not know for sure if the notification they expected to receive was legitimate. Therefore, we know that our 95 percent baseline is probably underestimated.

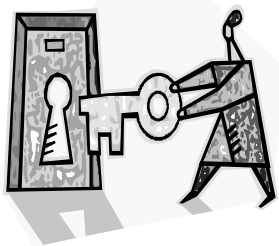
OVERALL

What Department of Corrections' services did you find most helpful?

Forty-one percent (352) of the respondents provided an answer to this question. For those who answered, many said they had not used Victim Witness Notification Program services yet. However, for those who had, 38 percent said the most useful service was receiving the notification. Many respondents said they were pleased to get a notification before the offender's release in order to prepare. About 13 percent of the people who responded to this question said DOC staff was most helpful. In most instances, a specific person or office was named. Other responses to this question included knowing they had a support system, a feeling of safety, and having the ability to get referrals from program personnel.

What Department of Corrections' services do you feel need improvement?

About thirty percent (261) of the respondents to the survey provided an answer to this question. For those who responded, thirty-eight percent (100) said the notification process could be improved. Some of these respondents said they did not receive a notification when they thought an offender was released, and others said the notification needed to be more timely, or they would like to receive notification earlier.



Nine percent (23) of respondents said they would like to receive follow-up reports for a couple of reasons. First, to receive updated information about the offender status and to know where the offender was currently located had facility movements taken place. Second, to let respondents know they were still enrolled in the program.

The remaining 47 percent (138) gave a variety of other comments to this question, including, but not limited to:

- Victims to attend parole board hearings.
- Availability of detailed information about the offender, including programming while incarcerated, release information and community supervision information.
- Counseling for victims in general, on information on court process, on what To do if they encounter the offender, support groups.
- Work on the programs and services offered now before adding any other services.
- To offer programs and services for victims or know what services are available.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many important findings that emerged from the survey. First, the results indicate that people utilizing the services of the Victim Witness Notification Program are not those who are likely to be the victim of a violent crime.¹ An overwhelming majority of Caucasians use Victim Witness services, however the NCVS reports that blacks have the highest rate of violent crime victimization. Furthermore, NCVS reports that males are more likely to be victims of a violent crime while results of the survey indicate the majority of the services are rendered to females. These findings are very insightful to understand who uses Victim Witness services, and how services can be marketed to better reach those in need of assistance.

Second, results indicate that many of the program participants have not had the need to utilize Victim Witness services yet, thus, they were not able to rate how well the program was doing. Those who had received services though were very pleased and rated information, services, and correspondence very high. Respondents were also able to provide much feedback about how to improve services, or what they would like to see offered by the program.

Finally, there were many trends that emerged from the questions in regards to the notification process. There were many program participants who were unclear as to when law and DOC policy require a participant to be notified of an offender movement or release. There were many respondents who said they had not received a notification for a facility to facility movement, when this is not required of the VWNP. It is also clear that participants want notification more frequently. Participants see information as a valuable asset, and to have more information would be better than to have too little. The most commonly cited example was for offenders who had been incarcerated for many years. Participants indicated that a follow up report would help to ensure they were still enrolled in the program. Furthermore, this would set their mind at ease that they did not miss a notification.

¹ This statement was made in comparison to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), which is conducted by the Bureau of Justice Statistics for the U.S. Department of Justice. It can be found on the BJS internet homepage.